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RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC IMMEDIATE  
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INFO RHHMUNA/USPACOM HONOLULU HI IMMEDIATE  
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA IMMEDIATE 2330  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK IMMEDIATE 0356  
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS IMMEDIATE  
RUEHRO/USMISSION UN ROME IMMEDIATE  
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC IMMEDIATE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 MANILA 002610

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

BANGKOK FOR USAID /OFDA REGIONAL ADVISOR A. DWYER  
USAID FOR DCHA/OFDA R. THAYER  
USAID W/ FOR ANE/AA AND DCHA/FPP  
GENEVA FOR N. KYLOH  
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ROME FOR USAID/OHA H. SPANOS  
SECDEF FOR SOLIC  
JOINT STAFF WASHDC FOR J3/J4/J5  
PACOM FOR J3/J4/J5  
NSC FOR P. MARCHAM

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [EAID](#) [SOCI](#) [PREL](#) [KPAO](#) [SENV](#) [EAGR](#) [CASC](#) [RP](#)

SUBJECT: FEARS RISE THAT PHILIPPINES' MOST ACTIVE VOLCANO SET TO ERUPT

REFTELS: A) Manila 2597 B) Manila 2583

11. (SBU) Summary. Philippine volcanologists warned on December 20 that a hazardous eruption was imminent, after observing Mount Mayon hurl increasing amounts of ash and lava skyward. Provincial authorities have evacuated nearly all of the 46,000 residents from within five miles of the summit, and stand ready to evacuate an additional 80,000 in the event of a volcanic explosion and/or continuing rains. Officials expressed concern that they will be unable to fund a prolonged evacuation of six weeks or more, and have requested funds, supplies and personnel from Philippine government agencies. A multitude of Mission and U.S. Government agencies, including the U.S. military, the U.S. Agency for International Development, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, and the Peace Corps have previously contributed to disaster relief and preparedness efforts in the area, and stand ready to do so again if required. End Summary.

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Odds of Hazardous Eruption Now Rated High  
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12. (SBU) Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology (PHIVOLCS) scientists based their December 20 decision to raise the Mayon volcano's Alert Level to 4 (of 5 levels) on the large increases in seismic activity and gas emissions, as well as on observations of lava fountains and ash eruptions. Since the initial evacuations began on December 14, the daily number of volcanic earthquakes increased from 83 to almost 2,000, and the volume of sulfur dioxide gas emissions surged from 535 to over 6,500 tons per day, according to PHIVOLCS bulletins. On December 21, PHILVOCS researchers reported lava fountains rising 200 meters above the crater, and noted that the lava front now reached three miles below the summit.

13. (SBU) Mission disaster Relief Officer (MDROff) reports that the evacuation centers are currently in good condition, and authorities are meeting the 46,000 evacuees' basic needs for clean water, food,

and medical care. The Ambassador spoke with the chairman of the Philippine National Red Cross on December 22, who said they felt well-prepared to assist with potential injuries following an eruption, as they had deployed a field hospital and extra ambulances to the area.

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'It Takes a Village' to Run an Evacuation Center  
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14. (SBU) Albay provincial Governor Jose Sarte 'Joey' Salceda told us that he has instituted an array of costly incentives and pledges to meet his 'primary challenge' of preventing evacuees from returning to their homes in the volcano danger zone. These include a daily ration of five kilograms of rice per family per day, holiday meals, Christmas gifts for children, a 3,000 peso stipend to be paid to farmers after the crisis is over, and feed for evacuees' farm animals. He also cited the need for social and psychological and counseling ('our greatest need'), as well as for preventive medical care. Salceda stressed that only an all-around supportive environment, in his words 'a village', could prevent a mass exodus from the evacuation centers. He estimated the cost of a six-week evacuation to be 67 million pesos (USD 1.5 million), well beyond the province's calamity fund. The Albay Provincial Disaster Coordinating Council (PDCC) has requested funds, supplies, and personnel from the National Disaster Coordinating Council, the Department of Social Welfare and Development and the Department of Health to meet these needs.

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Heavy Rains, Major Explosion Officials' Worst Fears  
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15. (SBU) Both Governor Salceda and PHIVOLCS Assistant Director Bartolome Bautista believe heavy rains pose the greatest threat of a major disaster. (Note: Although Mount Mayon's October 2006 eruption caused no loss of life, Typhoon Durian (Reming) the following month triggered landslides of volcanic debris that killed an estimated 1,000. End Note.) The Governor told us that he will begin to evacuate the more densely populated areas outside the five mile danger zone if the currently intermittent rains strengthen, or if a volcanic explosion takes place. Bautista lamented that the media and general public fail to recognize the technical distinction between a Mount Pinatubo-style volcanic explosion (which PHIVOLCS considers unlikely) and an eruption, which by definition consists of ash plumes and lava flows, the type of behavior predicted to intensify on Mount Mayon. Governor Salceda noted that unlike the farmers that constitute the current evacuees, the more urban residents of an extended eight mile danger zone are more fearful of an eruption, and many are requesting to be evacuated.

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Volcanic Pyrotechnics Draw Tourists  
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16. (SBU) Although Governor Salceda has publicly stated that promoting disaster tourism is not official provincial policy, some officials are taking the time to encourage the domestic and international tourists that continue to flock to the area. The Albay Public Safety and Emergency Management Office has set up strategic viewing areas outside the danger zone, and the PDCC Chairman Cedric Daep told local media that 'only a portion' of the regional capital Legazpi city was within range of a volcanic eruption. Mount Mayon's perfect cone shape is a consistent tourist draw in the best of times, but according to local contacts, the added attraction of volcanic pyrotechnics has greatly increased tourist numbers, generating a bonanza for the local tourism industry.

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Looking Out for American Citizens and Veterans  
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17. (SBU) All American citizens who live in the danger zone and are registered with the Consular section are accounted for. Consular staff continues to monitor the situation by contacting wardens in the affected area. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Outpatient Clinic at post has contacted all veterans residing in Albay province who receive medications via the clinic to confirm any changes in whereabouts and ensure continued delivery. The VA benefits office has screened all outgoing Filipino Veterans Equity Compensation program checks, as well as all monthly disability compensation and pension benefit checks to ensure accurate delivery to Albay province addresses.

18. (SBU) Post held an Emergency Action Committee (EAC) meeting on December 22 to prepare for a possible large scale eruption. The EAC reviewed the status of American citizens and veterans, and discussed USG relief options in the event of a large-scale disaster. The Management section will send a notice advising American and locally employed staff that travel to the affected area requires permission of the Regional Security Officer. The Consular section is sending a warden message advising of the upgrade to Alert level 4 and the resulting restrictions on travel of embassy personnel. An additional warden message has been prepared and will be issued in the event of an eruption.

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Long Record of U.S Disaster Preparedness and Relief

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19. (SBU) The United States has a long history of military and civilian disaster preparedness and relief efforts in the area. During the bilateral military and training exercise known as Balikatan 2009, U.S. and Philippine armed forces improved roads, constructed schools, and provided medical care to more than 21,000 local citizens. Similarly, U.S. Navy personnel provided free medical care and reconstructed damaged public buildings after Mount Mayon's 2006 eruption and after typhoon Durian (Reming) hit that same year. U.S. Peace Corps (PC) volunteers also pitched in after Typhoon Durian, distributing relief supplies, rebuilding homes, schools, and fishing boats, and assessing damage to facilitate relief aid. In addition to providing large amounts of relief supplies, the U.S. Agency for International Development/Philippines (USAID) has contributed \$5.0 million to restore livelihoods and construct over 900 typhoon- and earthquake-resistant homes in previously devastated areas. Both the Peace Corps and USAID have likewise invested heavily in disaster preparedness in this calamity-prone region. PC volunteers have provided technical assistance in disaster shelter construction and management, while USAID has sponsored disaster risk reduction training for teachers and children, worked with local government officials to develop disaster plans and low-cost warning systems, and pre-positioned emergency equipment and supplies in rural areas.

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Proactive USG Agencies Prepare to Assist  
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10. (SBU) The Consular Section has organized a 'fly-away team' that will be dispatched to assist Amcits in the affected area in the event of an eruption that makes the city of Legazpi uninhabitable. The team has prepared a rendezvous site outside the danger zone where they will provide Amcits in need with emergency loans and other assistance. The U.S. Joint Special Operations Task Force - Philippines is prepared to send a medical team to Albay province on short notice, and is in close contact with U.S. Pacific Command regarding possible future humanitarian assistance. USAID/Philippines is in constant contact with local government authorities, United Nations agencies on site, and the various Non-Governmental Organizations that operate in the area, including those who have implemented previous USAID disaster-relief programs. A Regional Advisor from USAID's Bangkok Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) is due to arrive in the Philippines on December 22. He will assist the Country Team in drafting a contingency plan based on a worst case scenario. Currently, USAID health and environment programs in the region and its personnel are

gearing up to provide immediate assistance as necessary, including support to evacuees in evacuation centers. USAID is also working closely with the U.S. military to ensure strong coordination and synergy is in place.

Kenney